

Miscellaneous things are to go here. - V.J./J.V.

CUL-DE-SAC

One story, carpet above hardwood /
Carpenter Gothic, a razor blade /
Or two or ten or one hundred more within, false teeth for these peeling walls which talk /
Adequate yard, nearby trees where sweetgum burr rolls in the shade /
Dust in the crawlspace is the fortune of all what may now walk /
Dead end street, quiet neighborhood /

Poor old Miss Snodgrass applied ointment /
In-between piano lessons /
Said something was always going around, hacked and coughed like a TB patient in a hygiene show /
During her edifying sessions /
When she taught the tots how to play such-and-such by so-and-so /
Then some night, with one final wheeze /
She slumped forward onto the keys /
And, glass eye meeting horse teeth, played her last crescendo /
Much to the horror of the three-fifteen appointment /

Mister August was unbreakable and untroubled /
Insisted Mister August, so robust /
He balanced lackadaisically from the topmost rung /
Skipped slaphappy between nails rouged with rust /
And let the rat poison dangle mere inches from his tongue /
Then one day, hopping along, he tumbled down into the basement stair by stair /
No more headaches, no more cares, no more umbrellas held high in the ozone-soaked air /
And by the steps, like the links in a fob to a broken watch, he lay there cold, so many songs still unsung /
So many knives left unjuggled /

One story, carpet above hardwood /
Carpenter Gothic, a razor blade /
Or two or ten or one hundred more within, false teeth for these peeling walls which talk /
Adequate yard, nearby trees where sweetgum burr rolls in the shade /
Dust in the crawlspace is the fortune of all what may now walk /
Dead end street, quiet neighborhood /

Work at the foundry never grew passe /
As far as Mister Dollop was concerned /
For him no matchbox brought to mind Pandora /

He smiled unfettered for the camera while flash powder burned /
And the flame of the boiler felt as distant as an aurora /
Then, dozing in a wingback, he let fall his pipe before the embers expired /
And from this vale of tears Mister Dollop permanently retired /
With nothing to sate an inquest but soot and a singed fedora /
And so his gurney was an ashtray /

At painting, Mister Flout was at the very least 'able' /
But technique did little to cure the strife /
Or glut the worm that gnawed within him crazily /
Neither "Dog Playing Marbles with Pigeon" nor "Still Life" /
Shed any light to the grim prospects he daily squinted at hazily /
Then, he bid farewell to this Sodom and /
Gommorah, tied a noose, and kicked out his ottoman /
And, with his mug frozen in one last Bronx cheer, hovered from the ceiling fan, still revolving lazily /
The hanged man's shoelaces dragging across the dining room table /

One story, carpet above hardwood /
Carpenter Gothic, a razor blade /
Or two or ten or one hundred more within, false teeth for these peeling walls which talk /
Adequate yard, nearby trees where sweetgum burr rolls in the shade /
Dust in the crawlspace is the fortune of all what may now walk /
Dead end street, quiet neighborhood /

Mister Pringle was always afeared he'd croak /
And kept a hogleg handy nearby whenever he shuffled off to sleep /
For use against any would-be knave with a dagger as a cure for a snore /
So that he might in the cold black night count sheep /
And not drips and drops from the faucet, steps forever creeping toward the door /
Then, the fatal congestion to his frantic breathing was a pillow, light as a feather /
But after his head rolled over dead, a shot flared without clearing leather /
And the man who came in from the dark, with a wound like sealing wax, lay stock still on the floor /
While the barrel of the business end of the six-shooter under the erstwhile Mister Pringle was ringed with smoke /

The relatives of the Bodkins drove past bubbles floating on the breeze /
Emanating from a wand lying next to a hula-hoop on the lawn /
They had planned to return borrowed saucers as they wheeled onto the gravel /
And feared the worst as when they heard the crunch of a tricycle underneath, like the tires of a belated hearse, and saw the family was gone /

Neighbors would say in their own special way that they overheard choice words the night prior -
“vacation,” “now,” “fun” - as the family car’s solitary headlamp swept across blinds, eager to
travel /

But one crank four doors down /

Swore with the pale face and sad conviction of a clown /

He’d seen that light and heard a bang like the slam of a gavel /

As it shrank to the size of the distant stars after rising up into the trees /

One story, carpet above hardwood /

Carpenter Gothic, a razor blade /

Or two or ten or one hundred more within, false teeth for these peeling walls which talk /

Adequate yard, nearby trees where sweetgum burr rolls in the shade /

Dust in the crawlspace is the fortune of all what may now walk /

Dead end street, quiet neighborhood /

[This is a poem of an idea I had over four years ago. The main goal was to rhyme; little attempt
at metre was made. Ideally set to a waltz, fitting the cyclical theme. My probable
miscomprehension of *To The Lighthouse* is partially an inspiration. Things that may haunt me;

- Lack of metre
- Language not prosaic enough for outward mundanity of the house?
- Final verse should be about a death at a birthday party involving a pony with a cone
attached to its head?
- Whatever further images for the circle motif I may think of]

BODYSNATCHER

[October 4, 2021]

It was dreary outside the crematorium. Rain poured from beyond the doors as the night
watchman sat at the desk in the lobby, eyeing some reading material of the sort. He wore a
faded cyan blue shirt with a wilting dark black hat. His dilapidated name tag read, in cursive
lettering;

Hello, my name is LOUIS.

As he stared at the cheaply printed magazine, a woman in another faded cyan shirt walked from
someplace further past the lobby and headed to the doors. The wilting black hat was traded in
for dark flowing hair. She was clutching a yellow umbrella and didn’t wear a name tag. She
found it too convenient.

“Night, Lou. I’m shovin’ on,” she said.

“Oh, you’re going?”

"Yeah. Figure I better get home to the family."

"I guess I'd better close up shop too."

She continued strolling toward the door as Lou put away the magazine. She pushed the handle and saw a silhouetted figure who had intent to do something similar. He was wearing a tattered hat, muddy overcoat with uneven tailcoats, and galoshes with rain flowing off them. He spoke in a dry and assured voice.

"Oh, thank you, Missus..."

"Banks."

"Why, thanks, Missus Banks."

"Don't mention it."

Missus Banks went out and unveiled her opaque sunny yellow umbrella and as the rain soaked man went in removed his old tattered hat. Lou looked up from storing his magazine and coffee mug in a compartment under his desk to announce to the man the daily crematorium schedule.

"Sorry sir, but we're closing soon."

A small puddle in the crevice of the tiles on the lobby floor had already formed due to the man's soaking wet presence. His previously steady voice gave way to a shakier, quieter tone.

"Oh, I see... I guess I'll just drag myself back home then," said the man as he slowly drooped toward the doors.

Lou, as empathic as the next crematorium night watchman, couldn't bare to see the man go back out sad in the rain.

"Is something the matter, sir?"

The man slowly swiveled back around and inched forward, speaking trembly again.

"It's just... ah, geez, it's dad. I - " he stuttered to get the words out as he lowered his head and Lou got up from his desk to comfort the man.

"Oh, my. What's happened?"

"Well, we - the rest of the family, turned him in here last week and, since then, I've just sat up every night racking myself about what I could've said to him... had I the chance," the man continued, clutching his hat to his chest.

Lou put a hand on the man's shoulder.

"I promised myself I wouldn't cry," said the man as he quickly moved the hat to cover his face.

"It's alright, Mister..."

"Caul. I - "

"Mister Caul, would you like a handkerchief?" asked Lou, pulling a red spotted bandana from his pocket.

"No thanks. I guess I just came here... to say one last goodbye... if that's possible... ?"

Lou put his handkerchief away.

"I suppose so. We have quite a lengthy cremation waiting time. Since this flu we've been running out of space to store all the bodies," spun Lou, without a hint of repulsion.

"No kidding."

"What's your father's full name?" Lou inquired as he retrieved a clipboard stuffed to the brim with papers from behind and under his desk.

"Earl Maurice Caul."

Lou rapidly flipped through the bulky clipboard, presumably sorted alphabetically.

"Widower?"

"That's pa alright."

"So you must be... Rupert?"

"That would be me."

Lou sat the clipboard back in its cramped compartment.

"Well, Mister Caul, the last person we cremated was a..." Lou took the clipboard out once again and glanced at the first page.

"...Duke Hopper, and since we go in hierarchal order of peerage, your father the Earl should still be intact."

"Oh, father wasn't an Earl. That was just his first name. He was a pauper for all his life."

Lou placed the clipboard on the desk this time.

"Oh, well, then he's definitely still here."

Lou motioned for the man to follow as he lead him down a long dimly light corridor out of the lobby. Lou's quiet steps were muffled by the sound of soggy galoshes hitting crematorium floor tiles.

"I see you came all the way from Vienna to visit your father?"

"Yes. Beautiful place up there. Just one last time."

The man took a damp cigarette pack out from his damper coat pocket and lifted a cigarette to his mouth.

"Oh, uh, sorry sir, but there's no smoking in here."

"Really? Just as well. Rain soaked 'em," said the man, sounding both sardonic and frustrated, "Y'know, dad always used to say, "Coffee and cigarettes, the breakfast of champions. Yeah, I guess it was bound to kill him sooner or later."

"But I thought he died in a car accident?"

The man clapped back.

"And if he hadn't bought that new cigarette pack, he would've stepped off that curb a second earlier."

The two reached an ominous steel door with an obnoxiously large lock and bolts for hinges.

Lou pulled out a ring with a circumference bigger than a fist and sifted through the tens of keys dangling from it, before deciding upon the correct one and inserting into the big lock. Something inside the door clacked and Lou slid the lock over as he pulled open the door with both hands. Inside was a room only slightly bigger than the lobby although differentiated by the fact that it was stuffed with dead bodies. Lou led the man through the trays of cadavers, arranged in a meticulous manner as to allow one to reach the furnaces - almost like a maze. They passed by the various persons no longer living, all partially hidden by tarps, some neater than others. All the bodies had a tag at hanging off their big toe - if they didn't have a big toe, it was the one next to that. The tags were more or less indecipherable without specific knowledge, but they may as well have simply read:

Hello, I am DEAD.

After some walking, Lou and the man reached the pauper aisle of the crematorium. Lou flicked through a few tags on a couple bodies before stopping decisively at one near the back corner.

"This should be Mister Caul Senior."

Lou lifted up the tarp as the man peered over.

"Yeah, that's him."

The man rattled his fingers on his hat in his hands.

"I hope you don't mind, but I think I'd like my final word with him alone. I guess I'm just a sentimental guy."

Lou put the key ring back in his pocket, opposite his handkerchief.

"Of course."

He navigated his way through the dead person maze and out the iron door. He peeked back in to clarify crematorium procedures.

"Oh, and, uh, I hope you don't mind, Mister Caul, but we keep the window at the right side of the hall open because of the smell."

The man turned his gaze from the dead Caul to Lou.

"That... makes sense."

Lou smiled and turned to walk away.

"I'll just keep this door cracked," he said before making his way down the long corridor back to the lobby. As soon as Lou was out of sight, the man placed his hat back on his head before he took out a burlap sheet from his coat and unfurled it. He proceeded to wrap it around the body on the tray, lifting up the late Mister Caul's limbs, head, and torso to fully encapsulate him, and tying it closed at both ends. The man lifted up the body in the sheet over his shoulder and maneuvered his way out of the maze, swiveling the sack carefully as to not crash into any of the trays. When he reached the door, he placed the body bag down and peeked his head outside. Lou was sweeping the day's waste into a little pile, before gathering it all up and dumping it in a rusty trash can. To the right of the crematorium was the open window. The man waited for Lou to sweep out of sight before opening the door slightly and quietly. He crouched down and grabbed the bag, dragging it out into the hall toward the window, stepping gradually so as to not emit any wet stomping noises from his flooded galoshes. He turned to see Lou walking toward the trash can with a tray of garbage and a clear view of the hall. The man picked up the pace and practically hopped behind the wall at the end of the corridor, yanking the body with him. He peered to the side of it, where Lou had placed the empty tray on a chair and was picking up the can to dispose of outside. When Lou exited the doors, the man continued dragging the body, hurriedly and inconsiderate of his galosh sloshing this time. He reached the window and saw Lou running through the rain carrying the trash can to a small shed. Lou went inside as the man lifted up the body prepared to through it into the dark of the night. Just then, the shed glowed with a fiery orange light for a brief few seconds before Lou exited with an empty trash can and the man ducked rapidly back down. He lifted himself up marginally to see Lou running back to the lobby. Sure enough, the doors soon open and Lou put the trash can back in its place. The man looked out the window and down to see that there was a slope, muddied and weathered from days of nonstop rain. The downpour was easing up for the night and the body would surely make a sound audible from the lobby if he tossed it down. Looking back at the iron door, the

man formulated a plan as he balanced the bag on the window sill. He walked briskly to the door, checked for Lou at the end of the hall, who was carrying the tray to store somewhere, and lightly kicked the door. He stepped softly but swiftly to the body bag as the door moved closer and closer to its frame. When he reached the bag, he pushed it off-balance and out of the window, then ran to the end of the corridor, galoshes practically shouting. As the door slid into position, so did the man, who postured himself squarely in front of it. The door finally buckled shut, letting out a loud metallic slam. As Lou came into view in the corridor, coming from the lobby, the man took his hat back off.

"Did you find everything well?" asked Lou, clutching the fistful of keys.

"I think so," replied the man in his archetypical quivering tone. Lou locked the large iron door.

He led the man to the lobby doors leading outside, where they parted ways.

"Goodnight, Mister Caul. Sorry for you loss."

The man stepped out of the doors and into the rain again. He walked a few steps forward before turning to his right and continuing around the corner of the building. Keeping his pace in the rain, he carried on to the spot where the window let out. He could barely see the body bag lying below it in the dark. It had rolled down the slope a ways away and into the grass. The man strolled into the darkness and stamped through the wet grass, the sound of his galoshes blending in. Reaching the bag, he knelt down to pick it up before spotting a silhouette in the window. He then dropped flat to his stomach in the grass, and the figure shut the window. He thanked the night for the blinding darkness. The body bag sat muddy and slightly torn in the grass, and the man took extra precaution in lifting to ensure it didn't rip. It lay on his shoulder once more and he went around another corner to the back of the building. He heard the soft sound of the front doors opening and closing, so he leaned around the corner. Lou was running out, dimly illuminated by the lobby light from inside, with a cheap magazine over his head to shield himself from the rain. He disappeared into the dark before another door opened-and-shut and a pair of headlights came on. The car sped off. Picking up the bag again, the man turned back around to run across the building's back wall. Once he reached the other corner, he ran into the dark to his own car; a jury-rigged jalopy that looked like it could fall apart if the rain poured on it too hard. The man opened the dirty trunk and lowered the body bag inside. He slammed it closed and ran to the driver's seat door, climbing inside. His own key ring, holding a lousy two, was pulled out of its pocket and sifted through, with a silver one being selected and inserted into the ignition. He turned it once, the car sputtered, then turned it a second time and the jalopy came back to life. It already had its foot in the grave when it drove out of the ditch the man had parked in and its front axle swerved a little too far to the left, skimming and sinking a dusty old sign in the muddy grass;

WELCOME TO THE BUNSEN CREMATORIUM. WE HOPE YOU DON'T COME BACK SOON.

The jalopy rattled and shook down the backwater road, and in the trunk it looked as though Mister Caul was rolling in his grave. Trees, telephone poles, and stop signs were all passed

quickly in the rain. The man eventually reached a long dirt route, and drove on its winding path for what seemed like an eternity, until a large makeshift cabin came into view. It had uneven walls and rotting wood and rusty sheet metal lining it, and a crooked chimney made of half-baked brick. There was a light on in the one remaining window; the others had been boarded up with the rotting planks. The jalopy took one last turn and slowed its pace as it approached the shanty garage. It was a proper fit for the crummy car, which sputtered out noise like a dying animal when it was parked. The man stepped out onto the small platform below the driver's seat door and shifted the entire car's weight with him, despite being a leaner fellow. His galoshes hit the gravel and he walked around to the trunk. Out came the bag and onto his shoulder. He continued to the cabin patio from under the protection of a canopy, although occasionally splashed with a rain drop or two from a hole in cloth. The wooden steps of the patio creaked under him as he went up, and on the deck there weeds strangling the terrace. When he reached the door, he pulled out his pitiful key ring and fondled the only other key on it, opening the rickety door. Inside was a large lamp lighting the room and another older man in a black cloak and boots, his head covered with frizzy white hair on the sides, though not the top, which was home to a worn out bowler cap. The door closed shut and some keys rattled back in their place.

"Welcome back, Raoul," said the older man to the other in a croaking voice, without ever turning around from what he was toying with, "You got 'em?"

"Fresh from the oven," said Raoul, as he rested the bag on the older man's operating table.

"Splendid. Who's this guy?"

He untied the sack, unveiling Mister Caul.

"Earl Maurice Caul. Widower. Got hit by a car."

"Poor fella," said the older man, reaching for a scalpel and turning on a light fixture on a nearby desk, aiming it at the body. "Why does an Earl need to cross a street?"

"He wasn't an Earl. Unless that was the setup to some dumb joke."

"No, and it wouldn't have made you laugh if it was." The older man opened a drawer in the desk and searched in vain for something, before opening another drawer adjacent.

"Poor fella," he continued, "getting hit by a car and all. And not being an Earl."

"Yeah," said Raoul, now pacing around the room, "works out well for the meningitis kids though."

"Well, it will assuming this is the guy. Say, do you know where I left my forceps?"

"I think you last had it in the previous guy's aorta."

"Oh, did I? Well, tough luck for us, already burned him."

“Us?” snarked Raoul, “You do know it was you who lost it, right?”

“Whoever’s fault it may be, I found another forceps,” he closed the drawers, “hey, you wouldn’t know where I left the vial, would you?”

“Jesus Christ, Doc.”

Doc took out a small test tube from his pocket. “I was just messing with you that time.”

He began fiddling around with the body.

Raoul went back to pacing, with the occasional creak of a floorboard.

“So how much are we getting if this one works anyway?” asked Raoul.

“We?” snarked Doc, “I don’t see you sticking your finger in any dead person’s eyes. Or filling their brain with meningitis.”

“Anyone can plug their fingers in some cadaver, Doc. It takes real finesse to steal from a crematorium. You know, I almost got caught this time.”

“If that’s your way of convincing me you’re as talented as me...” Doc droned off as he was dissecting something. “It’s a shame I lost that other scalpel, I got it at a big medical convention.”

“Doc,” Raoul said louder, “how much are we getting?”

“If it works and I deliver it to the doctors on time, I think a couple thousand a piece.”

Raoul let out a whistle.”

Doc continued dissecting.

“Hit by a car. I always said those automobiles were a bad idea. I told ‘em horseless carriages would open up a can of worms. Didn’t listen. I bet this poor sap wish he had. He’d still be Earl.”

“He’s not an Earl.”

“Well maybe he would’ve gotten the chance to be. You kill a man, you kill every opportunity he ever had.”

“Yeah, yeah,” replied Raoul distantly, “just dissect your body, old-timer.”

“How you can pilot one of those things is amazing to me.” Doc’s scalpel clanked.

“How you can open up some old guy’s face and gaze into his lifeless eyes for hours on end while you pump paramonium into ‘em puzzles me just the same.” Raoul’s galoshes squeaked.

“I think I’m putting up for the night,” Raoul said over the sloshing.

"Why? You don't want to stick around?"

"No thanks. Don't want to spoil my appetite."

Doc fished around some more.

"This one's still got some juice in his amygdala."

"Mmm. Peachy."

Raoul took out his damp pack of cigarettes and put one into his mouth impulsively.

"You really oughtta quit those things. Or someone's gonna have to exhume your body. Tell me, when you die, and at this rate you probably will any day, can I dissect you?"

Raoul flicked the soggy cigarette away and throw the pack in the trash can.

"Not on your life, Doc. And anyway, I just might have to quit. I have to stroll through the rain every other damn night. Not sure how many more mornings I can afford to buy a whole new pack."

"You wouldn't have to if you were a better actor."

"I've told you before, I never could shed alligator tears. It's harder to notice when I'm dripping."

"Never could shed real tears either. Didn't you ever feel real emotion for anything?"

"Yep. Anger at damp cigarettes."

"How about love? And you can't answer 'cigarettes.'"

"Goodnight, Doc."

"Night."

Raoul left the room via a door that looked like it was going to fall off from its rusty hinges any day now, and walked down a hallway with decaying flour-de-lis wallpaper to enter a small living quarters. In it was a wooden table in the center, a small stool with felt seating and some cheaply printed magazines on top of it, a bed with a thin blanket and a pillow lacking in stuffing, a lamp with a flowery Art Nouveau that severely clashed with the stone brook look of the rest of the room. He threw his coat and hat on the bed and turned on the fancy lamp. There, on the table, was a tray containing a half-eaten rarebit that Raoul had picked up from a soup kitchen and a pack of peanuts Raoul had stolen from the circus. Printed on the front of the pack was some blurb about not letting your kids choke to death on the shells and on the back a small comic strip about "Johnny Be Good," a small boy who goes around doing his chores and going to church and eating his vegetables everyday so that his parents will take him to see the circus. Raoul grabbed one of the magazines from the stool and took a seat at the table. It was a penny

dreadful, and despite being cheaply made it was far better reading material than the peanut comic. In it was a story about Dick Turpin, the 18th century highwayman. Raoul had read about Turpin before and already knew what happened at the end. While flipping the flimsy pages with one hand, Raoul tossed some peanuts in his mouth with the other. He did this for about an hour before he fell asleep, not reaching the part at the end where Dick Turpin gets hanged for stealing a horse. When he woke up, it was morning and he had been using the penny dreadfuls as pillows. Raoul lifted his face off the magazines groggily and got up from the table, walked over to the bed and threw on his coat and hat, turned off the lamp, then left his room. He walked through the dingy hallway with the sagging wallpaper and into the other room. He instinctively went to greet Doc, only to find he was not there. Doc couldn't have been asleep, as the body was also gone.

"Doc?" Raoul shouted.

He figured Doc had made a breakthrough in his meningitis research and had gone to sell the results to some stuffier doctors who didn't want to get their hands dirty with the bodysnatching business.

"And the money floweth forth," quipped Raoul, as he stepped outside and buttoned up his coat. Moisture hang in the air like it always does after a rainy night. He reached in the pockets for a cigarette but remembered that he had thrown the pack away. He put his hat on and head to his car for a trip to the drug store, walking under the partially torn canopy, onto the driver's seat step, shifting the weight of the car, got inside, and took out his key ring. When he put the key into the ignition, the jalopy crackled then went back to sleep. The key turned again and the same happened. Once more and the car made noises for a little bit longer before stopping. Raoul thought about doing it a fourth time, but resigned to his fate and stepped back outside. He figured walking to the store would be a good way to work off the peanuts. Pass the winding road and the stop signs and the telephone poles and the trees, after about an forty-five minutes of walking and the store came into view. Raoul stepped through the gravel parkway and opened the recently polished doors to inside.

"Raoul!" a voice boomed, before he had even fully walked in.

"Donnelly," Raoul returned, taking his hat off.

Donnelly Dunbar was the burly bald man who ran the drug store, alongside his two sons, Daniel and Dominic, one of whom was stocking the shelves in the back with mince pies.

"Where's the other one?" asked Raoul.

Donnelly's face sank a little, and looked down at the counter solemnly. His sturdier voice gave way to a shakier one.

"He's uh, he's at home. Came down with something," said Donnelly, starting the sentence when he was still looking down and finishing it with his eyes locked on Raoul.

"That's not good," said Raoul, a little lost on what to actually say, "do you think it's - "

"We're, uh, not sure," Donnelly interjected quickly, "the missus is at home taking care of him, so we're hoping it's not... anything too serious," the words dripped out of Donnelly's mouth like molasses.

"But hey," he said picking himself up, "got a fresh new pack of JOBs for ya'," Donnelly grabbed a pack saved for Raoul under the counter.

"Yeah... yeah, thanks." Raoul took some dried off money from his pocket and put it on the counter. He grabbed the pack, with that painted lady with the flowing hair basking on the wrapping of it. Donnelly looked down at the bills, before calling out to Raoul who was heading toward the door.

"Raoul, uh, this is way more than a pack of JOB cigarettes is worth."

"They were specially saved," said Raoul, turning around."

"Even specially saved JOB cigarettes aren't worth this much."

"Well," said Raoul, taking out one of the specially saved cigarettes, "I figured I oughta give you some from the bottom of my pocket since the ones at the top absorbed most of the rain. I hope you don't mind they're a little moist."

Raoul put the cigarette in his mouth and his hat on and turned back around to continue to the door. "Tell Missus Dunbar I said 'hi.'"

"Uh, not at all," said Donnelly, putting the money in the register. "Will do. Thanks a lot, Raoul."

Raoul reached for the door handle, but it opened before he could grab it. Standing outside holding the door was a woman with flowing brunette hair; a little like the one on the cigarette pack.

"Oh, thank you, Missus Dunbar," said Raoul, his mind still on the last conversation.

"Missus Banks," corrected the woman.

Raoul looked at her.

"Oh, why thanks, Missus... " memories from the night former came flooding back to him.

"Say," said Raoul inquisitively, "haven't you opened a door for me before?"

The woman stood puzzled for a moment, before recognizing the ragged clothes.

"Oh yeah," she beamed with recognition, "from last night. Y'know, I don't usually run into guys I meet at the crematorium again the next day."

“Well, I’m honored to be the first.”

Both of them were still standing in the doorway at this point, and had to awkwardly part to let another customer through.

“So, uh,” Raoul said, as the woman walked into the store finally, “did you come in for mince pies?”

The woman chuckled. “No, actually I have a problem.” She pulled out a golden lighter.

“I have that same issue,” Raoul pulled out the fresh pack of JOB cigarettes and removed one from the head of the painted lady. “May I?”

He held out the cigarette over flame of the woman’s lighter, and the tobacco tip lit up.

She exhaled the smoke. “I never did catch your name leaving work.”

“Raoul.”

“‘Raoul?’ What, are you an Dutch Earl?”

“No.”

They walked out of the drug store and to a nearby dinner where they ate pie and coffee out on the terrace.

“...so my sister works at a political campaign office and, Christ, the corruption she sees...”

“No kidding,” replied Raoul, listening intently while stuffing his face with strawberry pie.

He swallowed and inquired further about her home life.

“So if your mom found out...”

“Oh, well she’d probably notify the other Supreme Court Justices, and who knows the red tape that’d roll from there on out.”

“I see,” said Raoul, “what would you do?”

She put impaled another slice of pie with her fork.

“Nothing, I’m just the paper girl.”

She ate the pie as Raoul lifted a slice to his mouth. Before he could devour it, he noticed a darker patterned area of skin around her neck, below her necklace.

“Where’d you get that smart?” he asked, pointing his fork with the crumbling bits of pie on the end at her neck.

She looked down, "Oh, that, well," she lowered the coffee cup from which she was about to sip from, "it's kind of an embarrassing story."

"Well, I take it the coffee isn't that hot."

"No. I got the necklace from my mother, you see..."

"Ah, that makes sense. Supreme Court Justice money. It does look very expensive."

"Yes, well, one night at the crematorium, I was working near the furnaces and I had to fumble around with the bodies...to prepare them for cremation, you see, and, well, no offense to the dead, but I'd really feel creepy all over if my necklace was brushing against some of those people..."

"That makes sense. Gotta know who the dead people are if your necklace is brushing up against them."

"...so I took it off and laid it by the table near the furnace... and I guess when I went to put it back on, it had been sitting there for so long that it... well, you see."

"I do," said Raoul sympathetically to her, before each of them took a sip of coffee.

They both parted ways on the diner terrace and went opposite directions home on the dusty road. Around the bends and stop signs and trees and the telephone poles, Raoul made his way back, before it started raining. He didn't mind that much.

Raoul returned to the shack and saw the light was on in the window. He walked past his jalopy, possibly resigned to sputtering to life no more, and under the torn canopy being periodically poked with rain. By the time he reached the door, his galoshes made puddles. He went inside and Doc was cleaning out test tubes with a dish rag and a little bit of disinfectant. He turned his head to Raoul.

"Christ, where have you been all day?"

"Cigarettes. What's your excuse? One of your bodies run out on you?"

"You spent all day getting cigarettes?"

"What happened, Doc?"

Doc sighed pensively. "They wouldn't accept the Earl at the hospital, said something about how the circumstances of the experiment were too irreproducible to be used for a cure."

"He's not an Earl," Raoul let out a sigh along with him, "so no money for our troubles?"

"Not a cent."

Raoul let out a heavy groan as he aggressively yanked his hat off his head. "Is that all?"

"They said I should think about giving up this bodysnatching business altogether, go back to medical school and get a full degree."

Doc slid the test tube back on its rack, and began to scrub out another one.

"Easy enough for you," grouched Raoul, "but what am I going to do? I don't exactly have much of a resume."

"Work at crematorium?" replied Doc with a sly hopefulness.

"Doc!" shouted Raoul, as he began pacing in circles, his galoshes soaking the decrepit wooden floor.

"What? There's never a recession!" said Doc, putting the final test tube in its place and the rag and disinfectant on the counter. He turned to face the wall, staring at nothing for a few moments, before continuing, "And what do you mean easy enough for me? Why do you think I quit and teamed up with you in the first place? It wasn't out of a sense of camaraderie if that's what you were thinking!"

Raoul rubbed his eyes. "Well, that's good to know."

Doc carried on, his hands waving about now, "...besides, we put in all this effort and get so little out of it now, I'd fare better just putting all the work into the degree."

"We put in all the effort? I'm the one who has his neck on the line! I go out there every other night after you bungle the dissection or produce some irreproducible circumstance and run the gambit of my head rolling! And what do you do, Doc? Play with your toys?"

Doc shook his head for a couple seconds without saying anything, before jolting back around to yell at Raoul.

"Goddammit! What do I do? What do I do? Without me in the equation you'd just be some two-bit grave robber who goes home to empty house with no money and dirty fingernails every night! I had to smuggle that stinking Earl with meningitis into the hospital! You think I'm not risking it?"

"He is not an Earl!" Raoul had stopped dead in his tracks, his galoshes not making any noise over his shouts, "And that sounds like paradise to me! It was the nicest feeling I've felt in a while, what with your not being there this morning. Maybe I owe you some credit, doctor. Without your backwater alleyway connections to the bloodsuckers at the hospital, you might never get out of the house!"

That last shout didn't echo off the walls and throughout the room, but it felt like it did. The shack fell eerily silent, excluding the rain outside. Both of them had nothing left to say, or if they had,

they kept it to themselves. Doc turned around to the dusty counter with the test tubes and the old rag and the disinfectant, and Raoul whipped around and walked toward the rickety door, slamming it shut, and stomped down the hallway, galoshes sloshing, with the sagging wallpaper to his room. When he got in, he stood there idly for a moment, clenching his fists, then violently slid the penny dreadful magazines off the table and onto the floor. He slung his hat and coat off in their place and grabbed the circus peanuts bag, Johnny-Be-Good taunting him silently and without motion on the back. Even the rain was almost annoying to him now. His hands jammed themselves inside the bag and grabbed angrily for some peanuts, shoving them in his mouth, the same place the pie and coffee had been earlier that day, back when the rain wasn't bothersome. Reaching into his pockets, he pulled out a fresh new cigarette and lit it. He collapsed down flat on the bed, still eating peanuts while he puffed away on the cigarette, and stared at the wonky roof for a while before falling asleep. When he awoke, the cigarette had not set him on fire nor had he choked to death on peanuts like a part of him had hoped. He removed the crummy ashen cigarette from his chin, tossed the peanuts back on the table, and groggily got out of bed. Picking up his hat and coat, he pushed open the door and waddled down the sagging hallway, rubbing his eyes. Doc was in the main room fiddling with equipment in a cabinet. Raoul pried open his mouth.

"What time is it?"

"Morning, or something like it," replied Doc, with his face still buried in the cabinet.

Raoul picked up the newspaper on the otherwise vacant tray, finding his way to the obituaries.

"I'm gonna drop by the morgue and see who dropped dead."

"Get a widower."

"You don't think I know that by now?"

"I don't know what you know at this point."

His eyes landed on a name; Paula Moore.

"What about this one?" He gestured the paper in the direction of Doc.

"They a widower?"

"Close enough. Estranged half-brother in Tijuana."

"Found your part. How'd it happen?"

"Drowned. In Sunset Lake."

"Geez," Doc finally emerged from the cabinet, clutching a beaker.

"Yep," Raoul donned his coat and hat. He tossed the newspaper back on the tray and walked toward the door. Opening it, he was about to step outside when he remembered his present situation.

"Say, I need a new car," he said, still facing out of the shack.

"What'd you do to it?" Doc inquired, resting the recently acquired beaker on the countertop and beginning to look through a small drawer built in.

"It's not what I did," Raoul muttered, "it was the rain. It must've killed it, or something."

Doc scoffed. "Yeah, well, serves you right. Maybe now you'll start listening to me about those things."

Raoul sighed and finally stepped onto the decaying porch. A thick fog blanketed the ground and all around him, making the asymmetry of the porch slightly harder to notice. He began what was now a usual walk, under the worn canopy, passing the corpse of his jalopy, following the windy route, past the trees, stop signs, and telephone poles, the top portions of which were obscured by the hazy sky. He made a right where he previously took a left to the last crematorium, a zig rather than a zag. The obituary detailed the whereabouts of Miss Moore, which Raoul had rattling around in his head as he crunched along the gravel road. The fog was still dense when he arrived to the Eden Crematory. The only thing Raoul could see was a white picket sign that had the name of the place and a quaint slogan;

The greatest way to go.

As he walked further, he could make out the lobby building, as well as the vague outline of a chapel attached to the side. He continued forward, reaching a set of glossy glass doors with condensation on them. At the front desk sat a middle-aged woman reading a small book and wearing a blood red blouse with a sleek name tag that rather starkly stated;

LINDA.

Raoul grabbed the door handle and began a series of pulling, pushing, trying the other door handle, and realizing it was locked. He tapped on the misty glass. Linda reluctantly left her station and walked up to the doors. She took a skeleton key from the pocket of her blouse. Opening the door, she peeked her head outside.

"Sorry, sir, but we're not open yet," she spoke in a droll, sardonic tone. "Come back in an hour."

Raoul shuffled his head. "Oh, well, um, it's just..." he carried himself with the best quaking voice he could muster this early, "...it's my sister, she - "

"Wait," interjected Linda, "come inside."

Raoul squeezed through the door and removed his hat, as Linda made her way to a dark wooden door on the left side of the lobby.

"Who's your sister?"

"Uh, well, half-sister, actually. She's Paula Moore," he said, inching a few steps toward the mysterious door.

Linda removed a notepad from another pocket on her blouse, and flipped through it for a few seconds, before landing on a page with the M's.

"Sam Moore?"

"That would be me."

"Follow," she said, sliding the notepad into the pocket again and opening the door. They both entered dim hallway, with no windows.

"Maybe it's a good thing you got here so early," said Linda.

"Is that so?"

"She's not cremated yet, but she's due any day now. Paid a lotta money to get high up on the waiting list. Back when she was still alive, of course."

"Oh."

"Money she stole."

"Oh."

"Sorry if that's a touchy subject."

"It's alright. I guess that's sis."

"She must've meant a lot to you, coming all the way from Tijuana to see her."

"Oh, yeah. Beautiful place down there."

"Awfully close for estranged half-siblings."

"Well, I guess I'm a sentimental guy."

They reached the intimidating metallic door at the end of the hall. Linda lifted some locks and switches, and eventually open the door with the key. She forced it open and flicked on a light inside the furnace room. It was a clinically spacious chamber and the bodies were neatly packed within a wall of tray compartments. Raoul followed her as she scouted the esoteric numbers on the wall, before she reached the desired one and pulled out the tray. The body was

concealed by a translucent sheet, but even before he could fully make out her features, she looked familiar to Raoul. He leaned in further as Linda lifted up the sheet. Paula Moore had a burn mark where necklace would've been.

[Raoul pretends to be the girl's estranged half-brother from Tijuana.

Doc is gone

Penny dreadful pillows

Raoul leaves the crematorium in shock without smuggling Missus Banks'/Paula's body. When he goes back later that night, the body is gone.

Missus Dunbar takes up smoking to cope with her son's flu.

Missus Banks asks Raoul why cashier is calling him a different name than one he used the other night.

Dialogue idea:

- "You think too much."

- "It's a good problem to have."

"She's not cremated yet, but you got here just in time."

"Is that so?"

"Yep, she's due any day now. Paid a lotta money to get high up on the waiting list. While she was still alive of course."

"Oh."

"She stole the money."

"Oh."

"Christ, where have you been all day?"

"Cigarettes. What's your excuse?"

"You spent all day getting cigarettes?"

"I can dream."

"That's all you can do."]

[November 8, 2021 - November 28, 2021]

In a pearly white neoclassical building surrounded by freshly cut grass and methodically planted thickets of trees is a chamber room with laminated wood walls and various legislative insignia carved into them. On the opulent ceiling of the chamber are bright lighting fixtures as tiles and on the floor polished grey marble. At the center is a long oval-shaped table, with the ends pointing to north and south respectively. Two people, seated parallel to each other on the east and west sides even more respectively, are having a lively and spirited discussion on the nature of the affairs in the higher echelons of the government.

“...Lydia Peckingham, Vice Assistant Secretary Elaine Smith, Executive Treasury Officer Suzanne Stone, Senior Minutes Reader Helen Dreedle, the list goes on,” the woman dressed in a lurid green vest with explosive auburn hair and oversized glasses said with furious verve, gesturing passionately in all directions with her hands, “The point is, Mister Baxter, that the President has felt up almost every member of the opposite sex inside the Beltway!”

The man, Mister Baxter, sat rubbing his eyes with his hands before finally lowering them and opening his mouth. This was something that he rarely did himself, as he was ghostwriter for presidential speeches.

“Look, Miss Jones,” he said, beginning to make his own pointed gestures, letting his hands flop open in a haphazard pleading motion, “Do you know the expression let sleeping dogs lie?”

“But Mister Baxter, this is a scandal,” she replied with widened eyes and disconcerted eyebrows, “I’m not just going to sit by idly and let the American public be deceived!”

Mister Baxter sat up slightly and began glancing rapidly everywhere in the room except where Miss Jones was sitting. “Well, that’s the thing,” he let the words fall out of his mouth exasperatedly, “It’s better if you just did. Forgot you found out about all this, and, uh, how did you find out about all this again anyway?”

“I found a G-string in the nuclear football.”

“Right, well, just forget you found that g-string and go home and throw on the public access news or open some socialist reading material or whatever it is you do as a journalist, and don’t even bother thinking about it again,” he made a few more last sloppy begging gestures, “What the American public doesn’t know won’t hurt them.”

“The truth, Mister Baxter, the truth!” Miss Jones was standing up out of her chair at this point.

“...is more often than not a liability!” Mister Baxter lifted himself out of his chair, “So just go home, Miss Jones. We do this every other month and nothing ever comes of it, nothing good

and nothing bad, no publicity at all. At absolute worst it just means I have to stay up a little later to write in a few more sentences into a grade-C speech.”

“Well, maybe that’s reason enough for me.”

“Go home, Miss Jones.”

She gathered her things, which included a large pouch made of hemp thread and stuffed her binder with the photographic evidence of the G-string in the nuclear football, tossed it on the shoulder of her green vest and hurried out the room. She flung open the large portentous doors and stamped down the dimly lit hallway with a government symbol somewhere on the floor. Mister Baxter collected his things, which was a red ballpoint pen gifted to him by his family when he became a political speech ghostwriter ten years ago. When he finally left the building, it was dark out, and Miss Jones’ car was gone. There were no tire tracks in ground to indicate she had left, but Baxter figured that she must’ve sped out there in anger so quickly that the asphalt and gravel didn’t have time to register it. He walked briskly to his own car, a rusted vehicle that he parked under a streetlight nearby a ways away from the main building, partly because he did not want the other high-ranking political speech ghostwriters to see it and mock him, and partly because he knew nobody was going to steal it. When he reached the car, he removed his stainless keys and opened the door. He seated himself on the sagging leather and stuck the key in the ignition, turning it once, as the car sputtered, then once more as it came to life. He began his drive down the dark road. On one side him was the towering forest and on the other side the remnants of where lumber yards once stood. It would seem the trees won.

Baxter was tired and felt drowsy as he barely maintained a grip on the steering wheel. It didn’t matter much as the road was mostly straight and flat. His head was drifting to the trees and he may have fallen asleep had he not seen himself turning the steering wheel towards the forest and jolted himself awake to reorient it. He kept his senses peeled for a few more moments before he began to doze off again. He leaned back and before he knew it his eyes were closed. This time, his head rested on the leather of the seat and his hands continued to tilt the steering wheel ever-so-slightly toward the forest. He was aiming for a tree and was fast asleep. The car would’ve crashed, had it not been for a sudden vibrating force that awoke Baxter and shook the vehicle violently. He was soon back in the center of the road, although not due to his own steering. Baxter discovered that he no longer had control of the car when he attempted to hit the brakes and it did not stop. He panicked and looked frantically around the car for anything to somehow explain what was happening. He was facing the backseat when the car suddenly froze to a completely stop and sent him flying into the steering wheel which activated the airbags, propping up his head. He awkwardly stumbled out of the car. The door-ajar signal was the only noise he could hear in the dead of night, surrounded by woods. Looking at the car, it seemed to be as normal as it ever was; rusty and environmentally unconscious. Baxter wearily approached the front to pop open the hood. As reached his hands out, it flung open on its own. Barring that, there was nothing visibly wrong with the parts of the car. Baxter took a step back and glared at it. He realized that the area he was in looked noticeably brighter than it did earlier. Just then, his tie gravitated upward and into his face. He forced it back down, mouth agape and eyes wide. Screws in the bowels of his car began jittering. Baxter looked up to see two large

lights in the sky, and only one of them was the moon. The second light grew larger by the second. He turned to run but couldn't. Something was stopping him, holding him back. His tie levitated again and his coat tails began to point directly up to the sky. Soon the only thing keeping his coat on were his lanky ghostwriting arms. He glanced back at his car and noticed the screws were hovering above it. Looking back down, his feet were no longer grounded. Baxter made a running motion but to no avail, and after that he tried swimming. He rose higher in the sky and the light was closer and closer. He was paralyzed and could not look at anything except the massive light, which he ascended into. The sky fluttered for a moment and then the light was gone, along with Baxter. The only things remaining were a rusty car with the hood opened, a few screws, and a red ballpoint pen.

Baxter was unconscious for a while, his mind and body feeling dizzy and discombobulated, and when he woke up things weren't much better. Firstly, it was cold and pitch-black. Unlike all the other places he knew of, where his car had the smell of cheap leather, his house the smell of air freshener, and his office the smell of faxed pulpy paper, the void he was in had no odor. He also couldn't move. Try as he might, his arms and legs were strapped down to something. He glanced briefly around in the dark for some sense of orientation, with no luck. Soon, his head was resting back on something that felt like a comfortable chair and he began to close his eyes. It wouldn't have made much of a difference with the darkness of wherever he was had a bright light not pierced through the black the moment he tried to sleep. Something unrecognizable had moved in the dark and given away to this beacon. After the first light appeared, more around started activating. He realized they were lamps, and the room he was in was an off-kilter replica of his living room. If everything else hadn't given away that he wasn't home this certainly would not have succeeded in fooling him, as the size was wrong and the doors that would've led to his bedroom, bath, and kitchen were not in the correct locations. He also figured out what was preventing him from moving about this shoddy facade of his place; a Sears-Roebuck dark red leather recliner with metallic cuffs jerryrigged to the arms and legroom. Baxter did not look directly at the blinding light, but noticed that it was emerging from the ill-fitting entrance door, which had swung open on its own. He noticed the beige carpet gradually shifting under him, as the Sears-Roebuck recliner moved toward the doorway. Baxter continued averting his eyes until he passed through it, and the source of the light became clear. It was not any one direct light but instead the glow of a spartan white room. The size of this room was unreadable, as the pure untainted white made it hard to judge how high up the ceiling was and how far back the walls were. The only distinguishing feature was the botched version of Baxter's living room, which clashed harshly against everything else visible. The recliner was moving without a hitch on some invisible track toward the center of the room, and soon it reached its destination. Baxter looked up to see a wide tunnel above him that he had somehow not seen previously. It was portentously wide and seemed to extend upward infinitely. Smaller lights illuminated its sides, and Baxter could take his eyes off the tunnel despite the discomfort it caused him due to his unusual seating situation. A blue splotch became visible high up in the dark, passing rapidly yet gently by the lights. It continued descending until it reached Baxter where it stopped directly above him. It was an almost surreally perfect shade. It was oval-shaped and had totally smooth edges. Baxter contorted his head away from it ever so slightly and noticed the edges became hazy. He fixed his gaze on it once again and the oval was back to being soft and crisp.

“Oh, our apologies,” said a quiet yet unmistakably booming voice that echoed all around. “We don’t want to give you a crick in the neck.”

The blue lowered itself to be in front of him. Baxter followed it down.

“You’re probably a little confused,” said the same voice once more. It was monotonous and had no accent whatsoever, feeling totally alien to any known manner of speaking on Earth.

Baxter himself spoke in a shaky mid-Atlantic quiver.

“Where am I?” he asked.

“Right, well, you’re not on Earth. Far from it. We’d tell you the exact distance but the calculations aren’t readily in front of us.”

“Who are you? Or what?”

“We are one, yet made up of billions of sentient beings. A totally uniform collection of an entire world that forms a single entity.”

“Where are you, uh, all?”

“Right in front of you.”

Baxter took a harder look at the oval that was perfectly still in the air.

He took a second to gather together his eloquent vocabulary to assist him in verbalizing his abstract thoughts.

“You’re...the color blue?”

“We don’t see it that way, but that’s what we’ve been told.”

Baxter couldn’t believe it. It was as though a high-quality picture of an interior decor sample were talking to him, and in the third dimension.

“Why am I here? Why am I tied down to this chair?”

“We had to make sure you were secure during takeoff. You’re awfully fragile, you know.”

“Will you let me walk again? Can I even still walk?”

“You talk a lot. But I guess it’s all in your profession. Yes - you can and we will, soon. We just have to let your body adjust to the conditions.”

The Sears-Roebuck recliner rotated around, Baxter with it, and it began moving backwards.

“What are you going to do to me?”

“Don’t worry. We have no need for violence and inflicting suffering upon others. This discomfort is only temporary. We just haven’t figured out a better way to acclimate you yet,”

The recliner was pulling back further and further away from the center where the blue was, back into something Baxter could not see.

“We just wish to study and talk with you,” the voice continued, “Nothing more and nothing less. Picking up on your intricacies and nuances, observing you from a distance, seeing what makes you tick,”

Walls began to surround Baxter, and soon the recliner stopped in a small, dark room. A door slowly descended from above.

“Just think of it like you would a political problem at your workplace,” the voice said, unwavering in its apparent attempt at comfort, “Not all of this will be totally alien to you.”

The door closed and the chair finally fulfilled its purposes and reclined all the way back. It was completely dark again, and Baxter was still tired. He rested on the headrest and closed his eyes without a hitch. When he woke up, his head was woozy and an alarm clock beeping. He reached over to turn it off and realized that he was no longer tied to a Sears Roebuck recliner and instead in a bed with grey blankets and white pillows and a foam mattress, just like his bed at home. Any hope of the whole sordid encounter the night before being the result of some fever dream was lost when he noticed the room was still a grotesque double. He groggily got up out of the bed, which oddly felt like the only normal thing, and stood on the dull beige carpet. The unoffending business suit he had had on since yesterday morning was still on, and had become quite offending due to all the time had spent running and swimming in mid-air whilst he was being abducted. Without warning a misshapen door swung open, leading to a pale white bathroom. He cautiously entered and saw another replica, although just like the bed this one felt more true to the original. There was a window with a panel of a sunless overcast sky behind it. Baxter pried open the shower curtain, and all seemed normal for a moment. He reached for the nearest faucet and slowly turned the knob. Water began pouring out of the shower head, not too hot nor too cold, but lukewarm. It trickled out in a steady pace, and whatever morning grogginess, at least, he suspected it was morning, subsided quickly now as he knew this was artificial. At his real home, the shower water alternated between torrenting and dribbling and occasionally jettisoned out at irregular angles. Baxter started undoing his tie, and he had almost unfurled it from his neck when a single stream of water hit his chin. He looked up to see the stream emitting from the side of the shower head and the resemblance to his home life became uncanny. He tried to plug it with his hands, but that only led to more streams appearing. As soon as he removed his hands the entire front portion of the shower head fell off and water flooded out in one big continuous surge. He was getting soaked and yanked off his tie to jam it into the back of the nozzle. After a struggle, he heard a gurgling noise and the water finally stopped. He stepped back from the fiasco and sloshed his way into the living room, where another door opened. It led into another bright white chamber like from yesterday, or at least what he believed to be yesterday, except this one had rows of long clean curvy black tables extending as far as the eye could see. As far as Baxter’s eye could see, it met with a colorful figure not too far in the

distance at one of the tables. He thought it may have been a luridly green variant of the blue thing he had encountered earlier until he realized it was much worse. As he haggardly walked toward the figure, his suspicions were confirmed.

“Oh god,” the figure said, looking up from a tray on the table.

“Hello, Miss Jones,” Baxter replied.

She eyed him up and down with a scowl.

“Were you swimming when you were abducted?”

“In a way.”

“Of all the people to abduct,” Miss Jones angrily jammed her fork into a piece of food that looked like scrambled eggs, “They had to abduct you. Why couldn’t they have abducted somebody else,” she ominously twisted the fork around the alleged eggs in anger, “Or better yet, why couldn’t they have abducted you and just left me alone?”

“It would’ve been the highlight of my day,” Baxter took a seat opposite her in his soaking wet suit.

“Bet you didn’t think you’d be sitting at a table eating food in an infinite white chamber with me any day soon, did you?” Baxter said.

“I’d rather be probed.”

“Say,” he uttered glancing around the sprawling chamber, “When do I get my food?”

A metallic peck let out as Miss Jones impaled the eggs again.

“Look at that,” she said, “one night without his lobster dinner and Bordeaux champagne and he’s already complaining about food. Precious.”

Baxter spoke up to defend his honor.

“I’m hungry and I had a rough time with the shower. And besides, it’s Israeli champagne, my job doesn’t pay as well as the radical pamphlets say it does.”

Miss Jones scoffed and continued what seemed to be her irate tic of swirling eggs with a fork.

“You should take a mile long walk in somebody else’s shoes. I saw these photos of starving kids in Sarajevo, just terrible. I’d give up these eggs right now to ensure just one of those photos never got taken,” she held the fork with the eggs on it up to her mouth, “At least, I think they’re eggs.”

“Sarajevo is out of the jurisdiction of the United States government.”

“When has that ever stopped you?”

Baxter took a moment to respond and noticed that the blue thing from earlier was next to him.

“How long have you been there?” He turned and asked.

“We’ve been here quite a while,” the same monotonous voice from the other day said.

“Hey, pal, you know everything, right? Would you tell her that Sarajevo is out of the jurisdiction of the United States government?”

“We would be unable to answer that, as we ourselves long stopped using such trivialities as countries and nations.”

Baxter sighed. “That’s swell,” he said exasperatedly.

“Here’s your food.”

When Baxter turned back to the table, a tray with his favorite breakfast had appeared; eight graham crackers and a glass of low-fat milk.

“Continue your discussion,” and then the blue thing was gone.

Miss Jones looked at Baxter’s pitiful tray.

“What the hell is that?”

“Milk and crackers. Keeps the mind sharp for speech writing,” he pointed to his temple.”

“It looks revolting.”

“Well, if it’s so unappetizing, why don’t you move to another table?”

“I would, but I think this tray is made of tungsten,” she made some attempt to lift it, “Don’t think you I would’ve already?”

“Right, you did seem nicer than usual.”

And so they sat there eating their food - Baxter his eight graham crackers and Miss Jones her eggs. Besides the mastication and clinking of the trays and forks there were no sounds to be heard. Miss Jones was comforted, for it was the same environment she used to draw up exposes. Baxter was in hell. He had been accustomed to the constant white noise and bustle of mundanity. Suits talking over each other, phones ringing and being answered and declined, shoes scuffing against the recently polished floors. And that was just in the workplace. At home, he let the sound of melodrama reruns drone on in the background while an oscillating fan let out a soft murmur. Here, he was eating across from his worst enemy and he could hear his heartbeat. Worst yet, he was almost out of crackers and his milk was running low. It terrified

him, and he knew he had to initiate a heated debate utilizing his vast knowledge on various subjects and topics.

"I...." he started, finishing the last of his eight graham crackers, "I bet you don't know your zone."

"What?"

"I was just saying, I bet you don't know your zone."

"My zone?"

"Your postal zone. I bet you don't know it."

"What, are you gonna mail me my Excellency in Journalism Award? Will I hear a ticking sound when I pick it up?"

"The government doesn't bomb its own civilians, all I was asking was if you knew your postal zone."

"No, I do not know my postal zone."

"I had a feeling you didn't. Most people don't."

"So?"

"Well, when your militant liberation army friends ask you for it and you can't answer, how's that going to look?"

"I don't have friends like that and nobody on Earth has ever asked me for my postal zone."

"Still, I had a feeling you didn't know it."

"Whatever."

Miss Jones went back to eating her eggs. Baxter was stunned. His attempt at an impassioned argument was annulled, and with such innate apathy. He drank the last of his milk in an awkwardly cumbersome way as to allow extra time for him to think of how to prolong the conversation. The last gulp of milk went down and soon he knew he'd look stupid holding an empty glass up to his mouth.

"You know," he said, as Miss Jones' face became disillusioned quickly at the first sound of his voice, "It gets there faster that way."

"What?"

Baxter's spirits peaked. He'd lured her into a bull session, or so he thought.

“The mail. It gets there faster.”

“On who’s accord?”

“The post office’s.”

“Why does it get there faster?”

“Because they know the zone.”

“The zone?”

“The postal zone. Your postal zone, specifically.”

Miss Jones couldn’t believe this idiot speechwriter had gotten the bright idea to open his mouth and speak again, and she started rapidly consuming the last of her scrambled eggs.

“They sort it faster - by ‘they’, I mean the post office,” Baxter continued, “They sort it faster because they know the zone. The postal zone. Your postal zone. So it gets there faster.”

She lifted her face and spoke.

“I’m done,” she said loudly and succinctly to the chamber.

“Excellent,” the monotonous voice reappeared, along with the blue thing.

“Baxter,” the voice continued, “We presume you’re done as well?”

“Oh, uh, yeah, I’m -” Baxter looked back at the table to double check that he really was done, but both the trays had vanished.

“Good. Follow us.”

Baxter and Miss Jones got up, Miss Jones quicker, and followed the blue thing as it floated along the infinite rows of tables.

“How long is this gonna take?” Baxter inquired.

“It’s quicker than it looks,” replied the voice.

“At least it beats being tied to a Sears-Roebuck recliner.”

“You got tied to a Sears-Roebuck?” Miss Jones turned to Baxter with a snide look.

“Yeah, what’d you get honored with?”

“I got tied to an IKEA lounge chair.”

Baxter's face went maroon with anger.

"She got tied to a lounge chair?"

"All will be explained in time," the voice cryptically answered.

"Shame they didn't keep you there," Baxter flared at Miss Jones.

"If I had known I was going to have to eat breakfast with you, I would've stayed," she riposted.

"We're here," interrupted the voice, as Baxter and Miss Jones looked to see they had come to a large white wall with a door in front of them. The blue thing phased right through it, and just as the two humans looked confused, the door silently slid open. Inside was a dark room, in stark contrast to the previous ones they had been in, and at the center parallel to each other were a Sears-Roebuck recliner and an IKEA lounge chair.

"Don't panic," the voice echoed loudly, revealing that the room was much larger than it seemed, "Now that you've started to acclimate to this environment, we're going to perform a more obvious variety of test."

The air of morning breakfast subsided, and a more foreboding atmosphere took its place.

"Please, take your seats."

Baxter and Miss Jones gradually approached their respective chairs and sat down. The blue thing was in a perfectly motionless suspension.

"This experiment will only take a few moments, and is completely safe,"

Ominous machinery began to lower from above each chair. They were large circular hoops positioned horizontally and beaming down lights.

"Try not to toss and turn,"

The each mechanism lowered itself in front of Baxter and Miss Jones. Everything was blindingly bright, before it was pitch-black.

Baxter couldn't see, hear, or feel anything. It was as if he were submerged deep within the ocean. Then he saw soft light trickling through someplace. It bounced off bubbles that he could now see rising from the dark below him. He swam towards it, his senses still dulled. The light grew larger and brighter as his gesturing increased in speed. Soon, it engulfed him, and he was blinded again for a brief period, before white clinical walls became visible and he saw he was being held in the hands of some giant entity, the face of which was obscured by a light fixture being worn as headwear on its head. Baxter felt the hands turn under him as he was rotated around. It was there he saw a giant bald eagle in a hospice gown with its talons spread eagle themselves. Baxter tried to move but he couldn't. The eagle patient let out a squawk, and Baxter

felt himself being gravitated toward its open mouth. He was pulled further toward the eagle as its tongue fluttered violently. Soon, he was inside its mouth and it was dark again.

Miss Jones couldn't see either until a light bulb flicked in the void and she wished she couldn't again. She was in a dusty, decrepit room with machinery coated in cobwebs. The machine was pumping out newspapers and had a lever for operating the press. As she noticed this, she also realized that she had been using it the entire time. Looking around her, she could make out another figure mostly obscured by chiaroscuro shadows operating another newspaper machine. It was smoking and appeared as though it would catch fire any second. She tried to call out a warning but the words wouldn't leave her mouth. Just as she had feared, the machine exploded. Flames rose throughout the room and Miss Jones could see the figure burning as it crawled towards her, breaking through the shadows. It reached out for her as smoldering newspapers flew around the room being pulled out the air ducts. She started running and began coughing horribly due to the heavy smoke flooding the room. Bursting through a door she found miraculously and into a damp back alley, Miss Jones started up some rundown stairs and into a street crowded with formally dressed people walking in all directions. She cried out for help, and even though she spoke loudly this time, nobody seemed to acknowledge it. She screamed that the building was on fire and that someone was dying but it too affected nothing. She wailed to no avail. Suddenly, a piece of newspaper that had been flying in the air struck her in the leg. She ripped it off and continued yelling in vain, as another paper hit her. As soon as she tore it off, yet another came, and another. Miss Jones frantically tore off the newspapers disproportionate to the rate in which they were appearing. Her cries for help continued to be met with no response as newspapers swirled around her in a typhoon. One struck her in the face and she collapsed to the ground. She attempted to pry away the papers but it became futile as she was suffocating on layers of the sports section. Coated in newspapers, she struggled desperately for someone to somehow help, but the crowd simply curved around her plight. Soon she was mummified and became rigid. It went dark again.

Then it was blindingly bright, as the hoop machines each rose from Baxter and Miss Jones.

[Room seemed more familiar than his real home]

[Just found these next entries, 2/13/26.]

"That's all," the voice said, "For today."

Baxter and Miss Jones gradually rose from their seats. They proceeded to shuffle in the dark toward the door and out of it. When they were back into the spartan chamber that was now heavenly compared to the previous room, the blue thing disappeared. The two of them walked silently along the many rows of jet black tables toward their quarters. By the time Baxter got to his he had developed a sort of tunnel vision and hadn't noticed that Miss Jones wasn't beside him anymore. He wearily opened the door and ankle-high water came rushing out. Drifting along the water was his black tie that came to a stop at his feet. Picking it up, then squeezing and twisting to rinse it out, he sloshed through the water and into bed.

Baxter's eyes wedged themselves open to the same faux house they had opened to for some days now. It had begun to feel more real than his one back on Earth. He craned himself out of the bed and sacked his feet on the floor where they were immediately submerged in water as soon as he remembered that had happened. Picking up the rest of his body, he waded through the puddles as he reattached his now-dry tie and headed for the door. He lazily pushed it open and almost slipped when he took a step outside into the chamber. Composing himself, he took an early morning, he thought, glance at the eye-piercing walls that practically snapped him awake. The chamber really wasn't all that different from the porcelain white government building he worked in. Both instilled within him a sense of profound ennui that nothing would happen and a dread suspecting that anything that did would be bad. Miss Jones too had grown rather accustomed to the space as well, as it gave her a perpetual feeling of off-kilter anxiety and disconcerting uneasiness. It was homey all right. For her, it was comfortable to be uncomfortable, in a way. If she were comfortable then she knew something were terribly wrong, and either she or the world had gone screwy and it was only a matter of time before entropy took its hold with its rotting iron fist. To be comfortable with being uncomfortable, on the other hand, was to be totally adjusted to things falling apart, and they often did, and snug with the futile endeavor of trying to slow them from inevitably collapsing to pieces for as long as possible.

They came into each other's vision as they walked along the infinite rows of tables. Silently, Baxter took a seat and Miss Jones soon followed suit, sitting parallel to him. Baxter could once again hear his heartbeat starting up in the total quietness of that blank room, but couldn't possibly fathom what to say after the mind-probing events of the previous session.

He tried to draw from previous events, far more previous than that one, and let his brain roam across all twenty-eight years of his not-quite-pitiful life to retrieve something. He thought back to his childhood, an experience he and Miss Jones likely both shared, and to the antics he indulged in during that epoch. Overall, he was struck most by the total mediocrity of it all; Baxter remembered the bronze trophies he received for the spelling bees, the grade-B minus report cards, the social status that balanced between not popular yet also not totally friendless. They were melancholic memories indeed, and Baxter felt compelled to share the discomfort.

"Did you have any friends as a child?" He said in a flat tone.

Miss Jones slowly lifted her head up from the table and eyed Baxter.

"What kind of a question is that?"

Baxter gave up his inquiry easily.

"Forget it," he said, slouching down.

Miss Jones spoke, "What was your dream like?"

Regaining his middling posture, Baxter replied, "Dream?"

"Yeah, like the other day. With the room."

"Is that what that was? A dream?"

"Well, that's what it felt like."

Baxter unenthusiastically glanced around the chamber.

"Maybe that's what this all is," he said, "Just a horrible dream."

"Relax, Senator Byron. You're a politician, not a poet."

"I write speeches, I'm closer to a poet than most politicians - on the sliding scale of politicking to poetry, that is."

"Hello," said the monotonous voice, and when Baxter and Miss Jones turned they saw the blue thing idly floating in air as it always did right beside them.

A sense of dread filled the air, before they remembered that a meal had proceeded the experiment.

"Enjoy," the voice said, as the trays with the same food - scrambled eggs, and milk and graham crackers respectively - appeared in front of them. Immediately after, the blue thing was gone and it was silent again.

As she ate the eggs, Miss Jones thought back to her own childhood. She lived next to an interstate and couldn't remember ever feeling she had entered a place of quiet serenity prior to being abducted. Inside that small decaying house by the constantly bustling interstate were her mother and herself; every two weeks, her father would show up at the door with her half-sister and demand that her mother let Miss Jones go with him to some brownstone apartment out of town. When it was just her and her mother with the house falling apart around them, it wasn't uncommon for her to have to eat the macaroni embroidery she had glued onto school activism pamphlets some nights.

On the days she did go to school, her education was mostly subpar due to the constant drug-busting of teachers and the incessant noise of construction or demolition or reconstruction or redemolition going on outside. But none of that was in the chamber; only the sound of her chewing eggs - along with Baxter awkwardly gulping down crackers and sips of milk.

[At the end of the story, when Baxter and Miss Jones are (presumably) returned to Earth, the visit each other's parents in futile hope of finding someday they can stay together.]

Both of them ate for a while, before it was all gone and they could hear their heartbeats again, Miss Jones at peace with it and Baxter on the verge of being in pieces.

"You never answered my question," Miss Jones broke the icy silence. Baxter was almost startled.

"What was it again?"

"That thing yesterday, what happened in yours?"

"Oh yeah, well, a bald eagle gave birth to me," Baxter cleared his throat, "Then ate me."

"That doesn't sound so bad."

"What? My bird mother ate me. How is that not bad?" Baxter sardonically inquired.

"Well, at least yours was clearly a dream. Or whatever it is."

"It didn't feel like a dream, or whatever it is, while it was happening."

"Yeah, yeah," Miss Jones conceded, "I watched a person burn alive and suffocated in newspapers."

"Burnt alive AND suffocated in newspapers? What'd he do to deserve that?"

"No, I got suffocated in newspapers. And they didn't do anything. It was a printing press. It blew up."

"Maybe they did do something," Baxter pondered, "Maybe they were a subversive type."

"I thought you said that the government didn't bomb its own citizens?"

"Maybe it wasn't the government. Maybe it was the newspaper company."

"They don't do that either, and besides, not everybody gets what they deserve," the words fell out morosely, "You should know."

Baxter tapped on his empty food tray for a moment, conjuring up a response in his head. Before he could say whatever sentence he had cobbled together, the voice interrupted. He turned to his side and saw the blue thing was back.

"We see you're all done," it said, and then the trays were gone, "Please follow us."

Despite having only recently eaten, Baxter and Miss Jones each had a pit in their stomach.

The very idea of going through another session in the dark room was enough to make them wince. Baxter winced silently, but Miss Jones protested her apprehension.

"Can we not do the dream business stuff today?"

"Don't worry," the voice replied, "You're not."

The three of them approached the wall, as a door opened in a manner similar to the one concealing the dark room. Miss Jones and Baxter were suspicious until they caught a look at the room they were entering. It was the standard large bright chamber fare, except for one key difference; there was a massive window for one portion of the chamber wall. Outside of it was a spacious black void with white specs sprinkled liberally about, like pushpins on a dark felt mat.

"So that's space," awed Miss Jones as she steadily approached the window.

"Yes, it is. We've studied human perceptions of beauty and found that a majority of them enjoy observing it from the comfort of Earth."

"Nice to know they haven't changed it since we left," Baxter said, trying to take in the full view. He was, indeed, comforted by the tidy emptiness of it, but simultaneously he was deeply unnerved by not knowing what kept it so empty.

The booming voice soon intruded his uneasy thoughts. "We'd have shown you it sooner, but we were cleaning the glass."

"Cleaning it of what?" Miss Jones asked curiously.

"Billions of microscopic particles that fly around at millions of kilometers per second, per second, soaring away from the solar flares and star implosions going on at any given moment."

"Huh," both Baxter and Miss Jones uttered with different tones. Although each of them was paralyzed in front of the window, it was the result of their own particular brands of neurosis.

Whereas Baxter was frozen with contemplating dread, Miss Jones was dumbfounded by the total indifference of the universe. There were billions of microscopic particles rocketing in every pocket of space, but at least there were no presidential scandals.

And so they stood there for a while, the three of them; Baxter, Miss Jones, and the blue thing, before Baxter thought to ask a question that had only recently dawned on him.

"Why aren't we moving?"

"It'd be very disorienting for you two," the voice answered.

"How fast does this thing go when it does move?" Miss Jones picked up the line of questioning.

"Only slightly faster than light."

"Huh," said Miss Jones.

"Huh," reiterated Baxter.

The continued staring at the void of space, as the novelty of each tiny bright spec finally wore off.

"So are we just gonna stare at this all day?" Miss Jones asked, turning her head to the side, where the blue thing had disappeared, resulting her craning her head behind her to see the blue motionless spot in front of another door.

Baxter eventually took notice of Miss Jones' peculiar alignment and followed her gaze.

"Please, come forward," the voice spoke.

They approached ungracefully, out of sync with each other as Miss Jones stepped brisker than Baxter. Upon reaching the door, it opened to a dark room, albeit different from the previous dark room in that had dim orange lighting illuminating numerous clusters of tables. In the distance, the outline of a stage could just barely be made out.

"Take your seats," the voice said firmly, as it vanished soon thereafter. Miss Jones squinted as she inched through the darkness to the vague shape of a chair. Chairs nearby were being shaken and knocked over due to Baxter's meandering in the dark, until he finally found a place adjacent to Miss Jones and slowly staggered down onto the seat. The blue thing had reappeared on stage and soon the voice was speaking.

"Human perceptions of beauty also indicate an appreciation in music for most participants," the lights near the stage increased in brilliance, "The following is a subject unfoundedly assigned to life outside the world of humanity that we believe we instill a sense of homeliness and spirit of Americana."

The center of the stage lit up a cool blue as a figure began to emerge from the light rays. Even when indistinguishable, it had a swanky verve to it that was easily noticeable. Light parted to make way for its suave and an aura of unmistakable mid-century rebellion filled the room swiftly. Soon, a leg and arm were jutting out the side as the figure bent over and the thumping baseline of early-rock'n'roll poured forward. The figure sang with a voice of tremolo and shuffled along the stage, adopting a hip-thrust as its primary form of navigation. Miss Jones and Baxter had almost forgotten the presence of one another in all the excitement.

By the time they had noticed, a tray had appeared in front of each them, containing their respective dinner meals; for Baxter, a sandwich filled with a single slice of bologna, and for Miss Jones a bowl of goulash seasoned with an innumerable amount of herbs and spices and the like. Baxter took one glance at the her meal and repelled back in thinly-veiled disgust.

"That almost looks like borscht," he said with a grimace.

"Please," replied Miss Jones quickly as though she knew he would say something, "Yours' is the one that looks like communist food."

"Why?" Baxter switched his eye line to the pathetic bologna sandwich, "What's wrong with it?" Before she had even replied, Miss Jones had her own look of surprise and revulsion.

“‘What’s wrong with it?’ What do you mean ‘what’s wrong with it?’ It’s two pieces of rolled out wheat with a smoked pig into between.” She picked up a spoon and sipped the extravagant goulash.

“Yeah, well,” Baxter muttered, picking up the sandwich, “I’m surprised you can make a ‘gourmet’ meal like that after a long day of picketing.”

“I’m surprised you don’t have any reserved energy to make something better after hours of sitting in that prison cell of a office cubicle.”

Baxter chewed the sandwich bite quickly to get out his rebuttal.

“Well, I would,” he said after a quick gulp, “Except I have to talk about nuclear footballs and G-strings all day with you.”

Miss Jones looked back down at her simmering tray, with the music lilting in the background, and dipped her spoon in the sea of salt and pepper and curled noodles. “And that’s why dinner is the highlight of my day.”

(Bric-a-brac I somewhat arbitrarily choose to preserve here.

- Character despondent about no longer being a viable teenage suicide, all the romance gone out of the act; piddling around with a head full of lies only to be met with no significance at the end, no light at the end of the tunnel or pot of gold at the end of the rainbow (nor even a rainbow.)

Opening scene idea;

[11/29/21 - 11/30/21]

(Old NYC. Street lined with small stores and dingy restaurants. It is early in the morning and a few night owls/early birds are roaming the sidewalks. Focal point of a barbershop with a faded red and blue facade. A man exits; his white dress shirt, corduroy pants, and black loafers are covered in blood. Smoking a diminished cigarette, he strolls the curb and hails a cab, as we see he has a handkerchief-bandage on his hand.)

MAN: Yo, cab!

(A taxi drives by in the sparse traffic. The man looks quietly desperate. He spots another cab and his other hand, without a bandage, swivels up.)

MAN: Taxi!

(Another taxi goes by. The man lets out a puff of air and spots another cab. This time, he runs into the street and grabs onto the window edges of the cab before it can drive off. It comes to a halt and he opens the door.)

POV: INTERIOR SHOT OF CAB, LOOKING FROM FRONT WINDSHIELD.

(The cab driver, a grizzled stout man with a worn stocking cap and grey fingerless gloves looks back at the sight of a man.)

DRIVER: What the hell is this?

MAN: I need you to take me to 85th & West.

DRIVER: What- I'm not taking a bloodied fare.

MAN: Please.

DRIVER: Hey, shove off, pal. I'm about to go off duty.

MAN: I'll give you two-hundred dollars if you take me.

(The man throws the cash in the money compartment and slides it forward. The driver looks at it for a second, before sliding it back.)

DRIVER: No.

MAN: Three-hundred dollars.

(He pulls out another bill, throws it in, and slides it forward. This time, the driver doesn't slide it back.)

DRIVER: Okay.

(The man sighs and sits down, as the cab pulls forward.)

DRIVER: Where to again?

MAN: 85th & West.

DRIVER: Yeah.

(A beat. The driver notices the man's cigarette.)

DRIVER: Hey, you can't smoke in here.

(Another beat, as the man's eyes shoot around in frustration.)

MAN: I just gave you three-hundred dollars and you're telling me I can't smoke?

DRIVER: Well, either I drive or you smoke.

UNFINISHED PLAY;

c. 7/14/22

Setting: A crater on a Great War no man's land.

Characters: a neurotic medic, a brusque infantryman, and a dying melancholy corporal with a tendency to wax poetic and a locket of his sweetheart back home (character info supplied by bizarre anecdotes told by him)

SCENE I:

(the lighting of a match)

- "Who's there?"

- "Relax, it's just me."

- "Who's 'you?' I mean -"

- "I'm not the enemy, which is enough for you to be lucky."

...

- "Um..."

- "What?"

- "I think... I think you're poking me in the ribs."

- "With what?"

- "With your elbow."

- "What? No I'm not."

- "Oh yes you are. You've been poking me for the last half hour, I just didn't say anything because I thought my own."

- "I hate to say it, guy, but you must've been right."

- "What else could be poking me?"

- "I've got a gun."

- "Heavens...could that be it?"

- "No. My gun is in check."

- "Well, so are my elbows."

- "Trust me, if it were my gun, you'd be dead."

- "Is that right?"

- "Oh yeah."

- "Maybe it is mine."

- "I'm sure that's it. What else would it be but your elbow?"

- "My apologies, gentlemen."

- "Ah! Who else is there?"
- "I'm a Corporal. Corporal Fonda. At least, that's what it'll say on the stone."
- "Ah, saluted, Corporal!"
- "At ease."
- "Did you salute?"
- "Yeah, I saluted."
- "He's a fishy character, Corporal, I don't know if he saluted."
- "Nevermind that. It doesn't make any difference to me."
- "Why ever not? It's your rank, Corporal, you earned that rank, and I think the least you deserve is a salute."
- "I goddamn saluted!"
- "Uh...."
- "What do you say, Corporal, do we trust him?"
- "I'd be stupid not to. They say you shouldn't make any new enemies when you haven't got the time."
- "I'd say we have the time."
- "No, I haven't."
- "Why? Discharge coming up?"
- "You could say that. I'll just say I've had my last stomach flu."
- "Those antibiotics they have back home are swell, Corporal."
- "Home?"
- "Yes, home. Aren't you familiar with the concept?"
- "Oh, I'm familiar. I know my home. The United States of A. But you sound like a Tommy."
- "If you must know, I immigrated to your 'United States of A.' at age 25 by oceanic cruiser."
- "Oh yeah?"
- "Hey, how come when I shine the match on Corporal Fonda, I can still see light on the other side?"
- "I've got a hole running through me. You sail an oceanic cruiser through it."
- "Heavens! Here, hold my bag."
- "Christ, how much junk do you have in here?"
- "That junk might save this man, no, this Corporal's life."
- "I'm in a crater with a real life angel."
- "Better. A medical professional."
-
- "Hey, if I'm a licensed doctor and he's a Corporal, what does that make you?"
- "I'm a high-ranking sergeant."
- "Duly noted, sergeant....I saluted."
- "I know. I felt it."

[Assorted dialogue]

- "I signed a Corpus!"
- "Habeas or Hippocratic?"

- "He's not a lawyer, Corporal."

Dialogue idea;

- "Why don't you defect?"

- "You crazy? They'll shoot me in the back. What's your excuse?"

- "I'd violate the Corpus."

- "Guess we're even then, huh?"

- "Do you know how many years it takes to become a licensed medical professional? It takes just spit and stupidity to walk into that recruitment. office. You hear that? You'll only be losing spit. I'm risking a diploma!" / ("I'm risking ten years of college!")

- "I was supposed to be a devil dog..."

Dialogue idea; "I'm not letting you compromise that Corpus."

- "Yes, home. A domicile. It could be free-standing masonry or a humble abode withstanding any perils that may come its way. Or aren't you familiar with the concept?"

- "Oh, I'm familiar. I know my free-standing masonry; the United States of A."

- "I say, sure is loud out there, isn't it?"

- "It's no babbling brook."

... (several scenes later)

- "I wouldn't go out there, it's no tranquil meadow."

- "You lied to me. You lied to a doctor and a Corporal."

- "I didn't think we'd be alive in the morning."

- "We'll be fine. They're fighting them fierce up there. As long as you hear shooting, that means we're safe."

...

- "If I were the enemy, I'd be feeling mighty humiliated right about now."

- "Want some canned borscht, Corporal?"

- "No thanks, Doctor. Afraid it'll go right through me."

- "Say, are you feeling O.K.? You haven't touched your canned bouillon." [or something thereabouts.]

[Possible ending; the three (or maybe, by that point, two) soldiers try to surrender to insanity, imagining themselves at a countryside picnic [potentially in gas masks? Maybe girl from locket's face is obscured to make the following idea work better?]? Corporal appears with girl from locket, "Fellows, say hello to Mrs. Corporal ____"? (Her introduction is preceded by a description matching the details previously mentioned by the dying Corporal?) Or maybe, from either the medic or (as the following dialogue suggests) the infantryman, "Fellas, I'll be damned if this ain't the best party (pun on the military and civilian use of the word) I've ever been to"? Or "Three cheers for the best party under the sun"? Or "If this ain't one hell of a party, I don't wanna know what is!" ?]

[Possible title idea; "Three's a Crowd"?]

[think this one is unrelated]

- "They put in their coin, I'm the gumball that rolled out."

Here's one that I found just now and may as well include:

Squidward decides that the distance between the phone and his desk are what is giving him writer's block. He moves the phone over to the desk by the typewriter (he has switched from pen and paper to typewriter, believing that a change in technology will help him). He is typing and about to shift the thingy when he gets another distraction. He returns to his desk soon thereafter with a glass of drink and puts his elbows down on the table, causing the thingy to shift and knock over the drink onto the telephone wire, causing it to spark and the power to go out. Squidward lights candles and assures his pet cockroach that a change in lighting is just what he needs, while switching back to paper. Somehow the candles end up starting a fire and burning the paper, to which Squidward begs for some water. The water sprinkles kick in and extinguish the flames but also ruin the paper with water, and the residents evacuate the building because of the fire hazard, further delaying Squid's writing.

At one point, Squidward wets his finger, places it on the paper, and does a "sssst" sizzle sound, which leaves a splotch of saliva on the paper. When water from an overhead pipe begins dripping on the paper, a drop lands next to the saliva splotch.

(Maybe he also does a sizzle noise after sharpening his pencil vigorously and it has smoke emitting from the tip? And of course it would all pay off with him putting out a flame at the end during the fire and going "sssssst.")

Unfinished essay [8/7/21]:

Is SpongeBob Kafkaesque?; Absurdist Characteristics in SpongeBob SquarePants

- Intro (1949's *Waiting for Godot*, 1959's *Rhinoceros*, 1969's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, 1979's *Betrayal*, 1989's *BBC Talking Heads*, 1999's *SpongeBob SquarePants*)
- Body 1 (Concepts of existentialism and absurd premises in Hillenburg's previous works; *The Green Beret*, *Wormhole*, *Rocko's Modern Life*)
- Body 2 (Absurdist features in *SpongeBob*; Surreal humor, man's inhumanity to man, nightmarish bureaucracy, plot structure, Squidward as the Hunger Artist)
- Body 3 (Aspects of absurdism in later, post-Hillenburg episodes; *SpongeHenge*, *Gone*, *Lost in Clarinetland*)
- Conclusion (Jacques Cousteau quote)

In early 1949, Samuel Beckett completed work on his latest stage play after several years of crafting and honing it. Prior to the writing, Beckett had been a frustrated author and essayist struggling to find his direction in life, fearing that he would remain in the shadow of something more mundane than he longed for. He instead decided to acknowledge his burgeoning interest in surreal juxtaposition and incongruity, and to create a play which revolved around these concepts. The play in reference was *Waiting for Godot*, focusing on two tramps who discuss their abasement of reason whilst awaiting for the mysterious titular character Godot to arrive. It premiered in Paris before being translated from French by Beckett himself, and then performed at various European theatres, becoming a seminal proponent of a post-war literary movement that would later be labeled Theatre of the Absurd. Whereas America had been, at least at first, unscathed by the side-effects of the war, much of Europe lay in economic and quite literal ruin. The very foundation of many of its nations, such as religion, labor, and family, no longer seemed to offer adequate ways to find meaning after the world had witnessed the sheer scale of tragedy and destruction brought about by World War II. Many of its survivors were feeling lost and listless, like they were waiting for a vague sense of purpose that was never to come. In fact, the only certainty seemed to be uncertainty itself. Ten years after the publication and influence of *Waiting for Godot*, another French emigre Eugene Ionesco finished his work of absurdist fiction titled *Rhinoceros* in 1959, which followed a town of everyday people who are transformed into rhinoceroses (rhinoceri?). By the 1960s, the previously happy and content America was beginning to settle into its own malaise with the escalation of the Vietnam War, and in 1969, Kurt Vonnegut helped to proliferate the style of absurdism in the States with the success of his new novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*, that followed the disjointed misadventures of its naive main character. The movement, which was still developing across many forms of art in Europe, received yet another influential cornerstone with the play *Betrayal* by Harold Pinter. Releasing on the heels of 1979, it explored the neurotic arguments and self-deceiving antics of its characters. In 1989, absurdism would see its soiree into television with the BBC series *Talking Heads*, written by noted English playwright Alan Bennett. And finally in 1999, at the tail end of the most revolutionary millennium in human history, the genre would culminate in its ultimate form, utilizing all of the predefined characteristics, in a Nickelodeon Saturday-morning cartoon created by a marine biologist.

Stephen Hillenburg was born on August 21, 1961 in Lawton, Oklahoma to a military family before moving to California at the age of one. There, he developed a strong interest in marine

life at a young age, attributed to his exploration of tide pools and his viewings of the films of Jacques Cousteau. He would apparently bring home various organisms from tide pools that would "[end] up dying and smelling really bad." Another hobby he developed young was that of drawing, and the moment that encouraged him to continue practicing it came at third grade, where his teacher praised a work of art he had made of

"a bunch of army men ... kissing and hugging instead of fighting..." Hillenburg further commented; "Of course, this is 1970 ... She liked it because, I mean, obviously that was in the middle of [the Vietnam War]. She was, I would imagine, not a hundred percent for the war like a lot of people then. ... I had no idea about the implications, really, because I just thought it was a funny idea." His interest in animation was peaked when, in the 1970s, he saw Paul Driessen's short film "The Killing of an Egg" at the [International Tournée of Animation](#) in Los Angeles. The animation follows an elderly man who hears a voice trapped inside his breakfast egg and continues to tap on it until sadistically crushing it in his hands, afterwards he hears a tapping on his own home until an unseen force crushes him within the walls of the house. Although Hillenburg's fascination with art would continue to blossom, he decided to pursue a career in marine biology, believing that it would be difficult to maintain both the life of an artist and also make a living. However, prior to earning his major, he worked as a fry cook at a seafood restaurant. After graduating, he found a job as a marine biology teacher at the Orange County Marine Institute. While working there, he saw how enamored children were with tide pool ecology, and was asked by one of the higher-ups if he would be interested in creating a comic to help further educate kids on marine life. He titled the comic *The Intertidal Zone*, which followed a variety of anthropomorphic sea creatures, including Bob the Sponge.

Hillenburg cited several influences for the comic, including the aforementioned Paul Driessen of *The Killing of an Egg*, and Robert Crumb, the acclaimed underground comix cartoonist (much of the illustrations used of Kafka's work from here on out will be from Crumb's own *Introducing Kafka*). After realizing that his true passion was in art, Hillenburg attempted to get the comic published, but to no avail. So, naturally, he quit his job and enrolled in the California Institute of the Arts. Of this decision, Hillenburg stated; "Changing careers like that is scary, but the irony is that animation is a pretty healthy career right now and science education is more of a struggle." Hillenburg claimed that he planned on being "a starving artist", using his money to fund his films. Graduating in 1992 and earning a master in experimental animation, Hillenburg created several works of note while at CalArts. One of these shorts, *The Green Beret*, made in 1991, features a rather absurd premise about a Girl Scout with massive fists who obliterates neighborhoods whilst trying to sell Girl Scout cookies. Another short, titled *Wormholes*, created in 1992, follows a camera that continuously zooms out further and further, from blood cells to planets, showcasing Hillenburg's existential verve. This particular short was in competition with a certain fellow animator Joe Murray's short *My Dog Zero*. Murray, who was looking for help with his own animation project *Rocko's Modern Life*, saw *Wormholes* and offered Hillenburg a spot as a director on the series. Themes of the absurd can be found peppered throughout *Rocko's Modern Life*, such as characters directly acknowledging the illogic of their own world (musical episode where Rocko asks how they all know the words) and psychosexual power plays (that one where the frog wife hits on Rocko). *Rocko's Modern Life* was Nickelodeon's first in-house

cartoon production, and Hillenburg worked closely with Murray throughout the entire run of the series, allowing him to repay his loans used for his earlier animations.

Fish's inhumanity to fish

Fish's infishmanity to fish

Sea RHINOCEROS???

Verbal breakdown (ptttthtt) of communication (ptttthtt) in Rock (ptttthtt) Bottom (ptttthtt).

Gone is perhaps an inversion of the traditional Kafkaesque atmosphere. The individual (SpongeBob) has no bureaucracy or systems threatening them, and yet still goes insane, demonstrating the duality of two extremes.

In the Boots episode, Mr. Krabs experiences a Telltale Heart/Crime and Punishment (a piece of absurdist literature) situation when he gifts SpongeBob a pair of squeaky boots. Indeed, it seems everyone in Bikini Bottom is a prisoner of their own device.

Pizza Delivery (my fav episode :)))) sponge and squid fight against an indifferent universe.

JOHNNY THE ORPHANAGE-BURNER V. THE PEOPLE [2/17/21]

Your Honor,

Let's begin,

With some tales that I'm here to spin

To protect my client from being perjured,

Mister Johnny the Orphanage Burner,

You may think him vile, but I'll have you know,

Of the "Orphans for Public Benefit" act from a few years ago,

Passed by Congress, where it's clearly written,

Orphanages are to be used for training covert hitmen,

By burning it down, my client's saved plenty of lives,

Even if a few orphans had to fry,
My client's a vigilante with a sense of justice and duty,
And the real question being, who will play him in the movie?
Charles Bronson, or Clint Eastwood perhaps?
Wait a sec, I think we've gone off track,
This heinous trial my client shan't face,
Your Honor,
I rest my case.

Your Honor,
Here again,
Is my client Johnny for arson,
I can only imagine what he did,
I'll be darned! He burned another orphanage,
You may find it shocking, but I'm sure you'll recollect,
Of the Nukes R' Us corp.'s plan to erect,
A bomb factory to maybe end all wars for good,
Right where that very same orphanage stood,
So my client's not a villain, but a war hero,
He even brought the nun employment costs down to zero,
So, your honor and sisters, if I might,
This trial is out of sight.

Your Honor,

For the last time,
My client's string of orphanage burnings is not 'a crime',
Instead an act of social reform for a future bright,
Ignoring those buildings he tends to ignite,
Although the flames may have last for days,
Of the nearby forests that caught ablaze,
And despite the smoke inhalation cases and woodland animals that went extinct,
We have enough to space to build that ice cream shop next to the creek,
So finally, let's get this over with because I have a date,
My client is not -

Wait!

Before he goes any further,
Yes, it's me Johnny the Orphanage Burner,
I paint 'em charred from here to New York,
And to clear the murder charges I watched most children run out unhurt,
But these court trials are suffocating me,
Even more than the bronchitis I picked up from my pyromanic spree,
I can't stand another gavel slam, People's Court theme, or due process,
So to my crimes, I will confess,
My lawyer is a bloodsucker, and the truth is,
I just really enjoy burning down orphanages.

UNFINISHED POEM/LYRIC (transcribed directly from notes written on or around 7/15/21.)

“In a City Ruled Entirely by Camels” [except this part. I added this just now. I may have just had “A City Ruled Entirely by Camels” in mind.]

Long ago on an island in the Aral,
Now a city ruled entirely by camels...

Subject: Memory, legacy, generations.

Tone: Humorous, wistful (or wistfully humorous)

Metaphor: A ghost town run by camels.

Symbols: The people represent one generation; the camels the next. The water represents the fleeting world of the past, and the boats are the memories that remain - quite literally vessels of a former time. After the events of the previous generation; the camels must persevere with the lingering affects and legacies, for better or worse. [No, really.]

The people: generation The camels: the next [“perseverent animals” reads an arrow note.]

The water: flow of time The boats: legacies - vessels of memories

On these shores that stretch
far and vast /
Are the ships that sailed
In the past /
Not the ruins they lie
In now /
But filled with people who

Crowded the bow /

They fished for the fish that

Aren't there anymore /

And complained about the weather

When they got bored /

Until eventually something happened that

Made it like today /

Where drains appeared and pulled

The water away /

Then one-by-one the people left

For some other place /

When the camels came to replace them

Different but the same /

And all that remains of these

Former days /

Are the vessels that haunt

Present time and past place /

Of the memories belonging to either mammals

In a city ruled entirely by camels...

[I remember being frustrated trying to write this at the time.]

More miscellaneous:

Wedding song slowly morphs into funeral march.

Doubles motif imagery; cicada husks, X-ray view through shoe-fitting fluoroscope, stereoscopic cards, camera obscura, "the grass is always greener; the pool always aquamariner."

Suburban vacuum salesman knocks on door of his doppelgänger. Doppelgänger slowly assumes salesman's life. Salesman is shocked to realize at the end he casts no shadow and evidently it is he who was the double of the stranger, not vice versa.

Luckless family trip to amusement park, encounter with devilish figure. Family enters raffle at beginning, is delighted to learn they won, only to realize the prize was return tickets.

Story of some preternatural event or entity told through three pieces of written material; an early-17th century colonial broadside, a late-19th century gazette article, and a mid-century middle schooler's diary entries.

Story of a love triangle; a pretentious artist and a bloviating Poverty Row mogul fall for a singing telegram girl who (erroneously) fancies herself a femme fatale. Set in silent Hollywoodland. Supporting players include an erstwhile vaudeville dwarf who rooms near the artist, a circle of fellow down-and-out producers who meet for bull sessions (one with a Southwestern drawl, a Stetson hat, and a slight paunch; another with slicked-back hair, a pencil brush mustache, and an effete cigarette holder; and the third with a pince-nez, pills and lozenges to take?), and the matron and assorted tenants of a girls' boardinghouse as inhabited by the romantic interest. [The girl is a pathetic loser despite her attempts to appear otherwise, allowing the two rivals to look buffoonish without it being the work of a 'temptress.']

"Snodgrass' birth was no accident. It was, however, a mistake."

Gag where two would-be mashers in the back of a cab are courting with a metaphor taken to an absurd end, foreground shows hangdog hack driver completely unaffected.

Elaborating on an old idea by now; story set at a doomed early-17th century Virginian colony. A combination of political satire and Gothic thriller, tonally characterized by the former having a sense of menace and the later one of absurdity. Thematic point about the veneer of respectability civilization and political maneuvering put over the base, ignoble struggle for survival would not need to be rote or hamfisted in this context. All of this ideally.

Elaborating on yet another old idea; in the 1950s, a hapless water filter salesman, after being temporarily blinded in one eye by a chucked ice cube, decides to start a doomsday cult to abscond with the profits, but instead finds drawn into the whirlpool of the eccentric, desperate lives of those who latch onto his crackpot prophecies. By the bittersweet end (perhaps, during a quiet and playful moment with the cult members, he is whisked away by the arrival of his former

colleagues, never again to see the people he has come to have deep affection for, but doing some caring act for them from a distance before they all go their separate ways; final scene perhaps in the home of the first member and loyal advisor?), he has redeemed himself and achieved something akin to suburban/trailer park knight-errant status among the neurotics. Tell yourself stories, you'll never truly belong, but the memories have value. Or something.

"Caesar Lives;" The story follows a man obsessed with Julius Caesar who travels to Italy to arrange his own assassination and his jaded psychiatrist who follows him there.

Story I wrote for a class (I think) in middle school; prisoner crawls out of cell, is unsettled by the prospect of living in a cold, un-regimented world, tries to crawl back into cell but gets eaten by rats.

(Possibly fictional) song about radio news, upbeat melody. Catchy hook juxtaposing the lyrics. Nod along to and parrot without considering the substance. This is a comment on radio news. Or something.

(Alternate idea for wind story; Mother snuffles repeatedly, sister cracks knuckles. All generally obnoxious.)

(Mother says "practically spooled.")

(Grandpa Unthank or someone says "dadgum." I forget if this is in there.)

(Uncle Unthank more effete/aesthete/dandified?)

(Prose; "Mother Picayune... pushing the limits of metre when describing out loud whatever mundane task was at hand to the tune of any song then ricocheting within her brain.")

(First one may be in there already; conductor who places down stepping stool has a wooden leg. Also, maybe the two twin invalids board a tandem bicycle?)

Barely alternate title for dentist story; "A Small Ache"?

Elaborating on previous alternate dialogue gag idea;

- "Well, we can rule out yellow-bellied Snodgrass... you're a little too much of a greenhorn for a crime like this... forget Perkins, a blueblood like him? ... Ah, Mort, I've caught you... with your hand in the cookie jar."

I apparently considered that decent enough to include.

Speech gag idea for bumbling character; "That this seemingly unsinkable bullet train flew too close to the Sun..."

“On October 5th, 1974, he married Mary Merrimack. Miss Merrimack came from good Kalamazoo stock and had a ratings share of twenty-seven-point-fourteen percent; altogether seducted.”

Alternate idea for space story; puppet training video?

Scene or something set at an afterschool Halloween gathering (within the school.)

“Questionable quality.”

Alternate ending for “A Slight Ache”;

(3/29/26)

“This is God. Now, say ‘ah!’”

Ned guided the drill forward and McNahly, in a sense, said “ah,” and kept saying it, like so much sweet music.